

Architecture, Settlement Structure, and Labor Relations At Three Antebellum Plantations On Sapelo Island, Georgia

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Abstract: Research at three antebellum plantations on Sapelo Island, Georgia indicates a wide variety in Geechee settlement forms, construction techniques and materials, and architectural artifacts associated with structures. Based on documentary and archaeological data, two contrasting forms of settlement patterning are described that correlate with distinct labor relations at individual plantations. Significant slave cabin construction changes over a 60 year period are presented that resulted from either coercion or choice. Finally, archaeological manifestations of slave cabin details (windows and tabby plaster) are described and related to status differences between planter and slave.

INTRODUCTION

Sapelo Island is a Georgia barrier island that was home for generations of African-derived Geechee populations. African slaves probably arrived there as early as 1762, when Scotsman and Indian trader Patrick McKay purchased the Island (Sullivan 1997:80). In his 14 years of occupation at the island's north end, McKay is believed to have built a residence, slave quarters, and outbuildings as part of his plantation endeavor; a wharf accessing the relatively deep water of the adjacent Mud River at what is now known as High Point (Figure 1) was likely a part of this initial landscape. After he died, the plantation and presumably its slaves were eventually acquired by the Societe de Sapelo. This ill-fated partnership of French expatriate investors sought to provide safe haven in Georgia for their fortunes (and heads) during the French Revolution. After just three years, internal bickering—including the murder of one of the Societe's partners by a fellow-investor—led to the dissolution of the company in 1793 (Keber 2002; Thomas 1989). Fifteen slaves were listed as part of the company's assets during its dissolution.

By the turn of the 18th century, other landowners were developing plantations on Sapelo. A series of resident and absentee owners are associated with Chocolate Plantation, about 5 km south of High Point (Figure 1). At least 68 slaves were present at this plantation after 1797, when Lewis Harrington acquired the property (Sullivan 1997:87). Most of the extant tabby ruins at Chocolate, including the remains of at least 10 slave cabins, are associated with Edward Swarbreck (from 1808 - 1827) and Charles Rogers (1827 - 1843); see Figure 2. The 1830 Federal Census indicates that over 100 slaves were associated with Chocolate. In 1843 the plantation was bought by Thomas Spalding, one of the most prominent planters on the Georgia coast (Coulter 1940; DeVan 2008). Except for 650 acres, Spalding eventually owned the entire island, and by 1825 he owned over 400 slaves. Spalding's slaves included some who probably accompanied his purchase of the property, others acquired through his father's estate, and some from cargoes bound from the British West Indies and Africa (Crook 2007). In 1810 he built a substantial tabby mansion at the south end (Figures 1 and 3), where he lived until his death in 1851.

Spalding was an atypical coastal planter in two ways. First, he was a champion for innovative agricultural practices, including production of a variety of crops rather than



Figure 1. Sapelo Island Vicinity with Plantation Site Locations.



Figure 2. Chocolate Plantation Tabby Ruins, c. early 1930s. Vanishing Georgia Collection, Georgia Department of Archives and History.

solely depending on customary staples like rice or cotton (Coulter 1940:87-110). At one time or another his slaves raised Sea Island cotton, sugar, indigo, grapes, corn, rice, and cattle; even orange, olive and mulberry groves were planted before they succumbed to a series of killing frosts. Prior to the reduction of sugar import tariffs in 1832, sugar cane production proved to be especially lucrative, and Spalding constructed an elaborate sugar processing plant at what is today known as Long Tabby (Crook and O'Grady 1977).

Second, Spalding's approach to managing his slaves contrasted markedly from that of other planters, particularly Pierce Butler in neighboring Glynn County (Stewart



Figure 3. Ruins of Spalding's South End Mansion, c. 1920s. Vanishing Georgia Collection, Georgia Department of Archives and History.

1996). All of Spalding's slaves worked under a task system, as opposed to the gang system commonly used on upland cotton plantations (Crook 2001). Additionally, Spalding refused to use white overseers and rarely inflicted harsh punishments on problematic slaves. Finally, and importantly, much of Spalding's slave force lived in dispersed settlements that were spread out over his extensive holdings (Crook 2008). Presumably the slaves on Spalding's plantation were able to acquire at least a limited degree of autonomy, and for this he is often portrayed as a benevolent slave owner. Of course, Spalding's seemingly benign labor management philosophy was predicated on economic self interest since self-reliant slaves required fewer provisions from plantation stores. Spalding's slaves owned their own cattle, chickens, hogs, and occasionally horses, and were free to sell vegetables that they grew in their own gardens (Coulter 1940:85). Although he frequently experimented with other crops, Spalding's primary profits were derived from cotton and sugar production; by comparison, rice fields were notoriously exhaustive and often lethal places for slaves to work (Stewart 1996:140-141). Spalding believed that his slaves were healthier, worked more efficiently, and presented fewer disciplinary problems than plantations that were ruled with an iron hand.

SITE COMPARISONS

Archaeological manifestations of two contrasting labor regimes are present on Sapelo Island, and it is possible to directly compare Geechee-associated archaeological signatures from Chocolate and several of Spalding's slave communities on the South End (Figure 1); limited information from High Point will also be included. Most of this data is derived from Crook 2008; Honerkamp 2008; Honerkamp et al. 2006; and Honerkamp and DeVan 2008.

We will begin with Chocolate, particularly the Swarbreck (1808 - 1827) and Rogers (1827 - 1843) occupations, since most of the extant foundations at the site are believed to have been built during their ownership. Settlement patterning at Chocolate is clearly illustrated from the composite map of tabby foundations shown in Figure 4. This map is derived from survey and testing projects undertaken by the authors in the late

1970s and again in 2006 (Larson 1980; Honerkamp et. al. 2007). The plantation manor, a warehouse, and other ancillary structures are all present near and parallel to the Mud River, reflecting the importance of water transportation to this island plantation; indeed, the largest building on the site, a substantial barn, is directly adjacent to the river. In contrast, two parallel rows of slave quarters behind the Big House, spaced some 10 m apart and separated by a broad open area or plaza 50m across, extend away from the river. Vast agricultural fields appeared to the north and south.

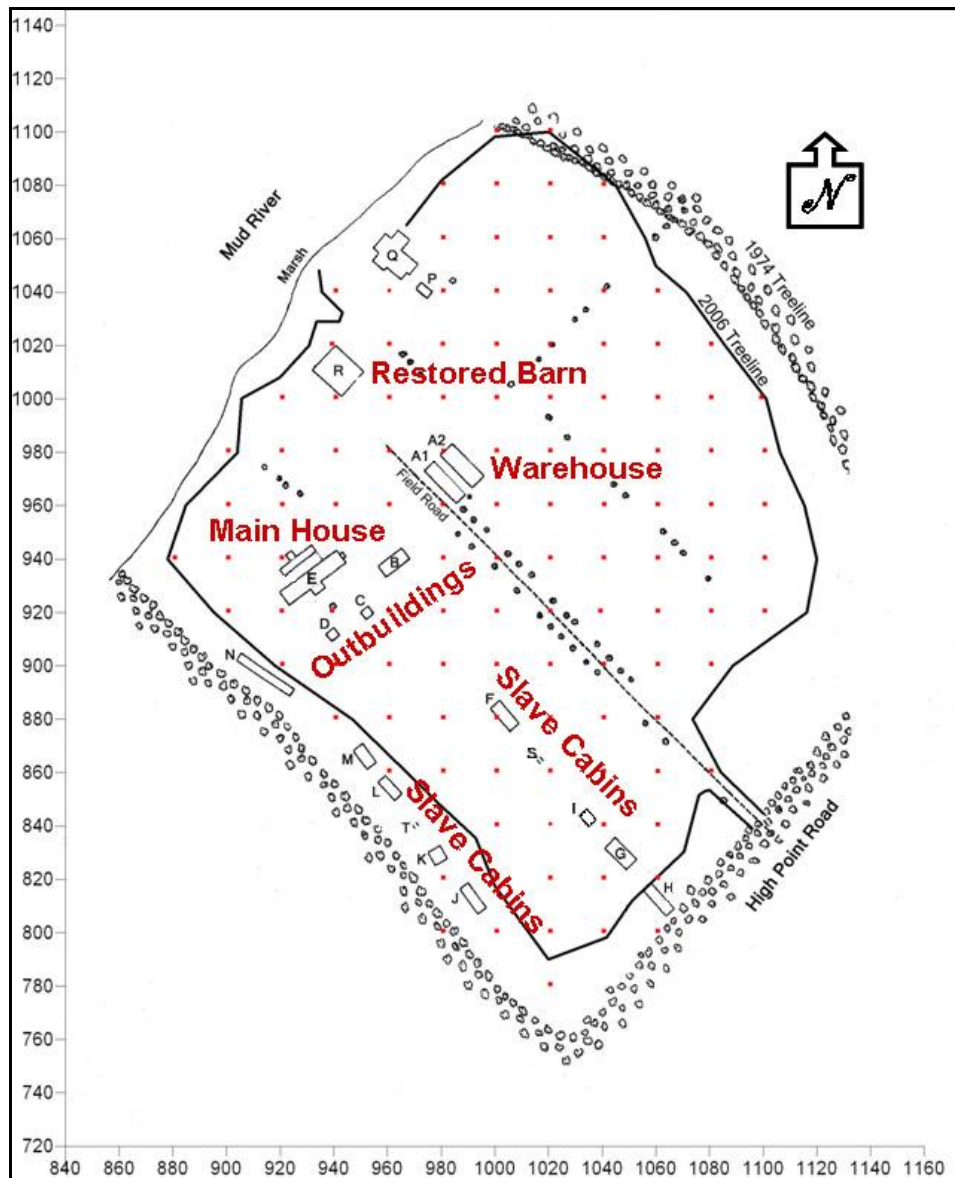


Figure 4. Overview of Archaeological Features and Survey Grid at Chocolate. Key: A1/A2, warehouses; B/C/D/N, support structures; E, planter's residence; R, barn; Q, P, modern structures; all other structures are slave cabin duplexes. The 2006 survey pits are shown as red squares (not to scale); metric grid orientation is magnetic north.

The slave quarters consist of a double row of tabby duplexes with central chimneys and finished tabby floors, each side measuring about 4.3 m by 6.1 m. All are visible from

the Big House. Interestingly, the manor has two entrances: one is present (along with a veranda) facing the river, while the second faces the plantation plaza and slave cabins (Simmons 2004). This layout at Chocolate conforms to a formal plantation pattern found throughout the Gullah-Geechee area. As summarized by historian Mary Bullard (2003:167), “Antebellum plantation settlement . . . usually followed a pattern that ensured maximum slave surveillance, with the houses of the planter and the overseer located near the linearly arranged slave quarters.”

A rare discussion of the slave housing at Chocolate is presented in an 1821 publication by John L. Hopkins that directly quotes Edward Swarbreck (p. 156): “[T]he walls are of tabby, which in a little while becomes like stone, requiring no repair: this causes a considerable saving to the negroes, for it is generally expected that they will make the repairs as they become requisite, unless they are so to much extent, and then the plantation mechanics are employed: these always build the negro houses.” When asked his motive for building the quarters of tabby, Swarbreck replied “It makes my negroes more comfortable, and I desire to leave my estate as valuable as possible to those who may inherit it.”

The enslaved Geechee settlements at Thomas Spalding’s plantation exhibited a pattern very different than the one at Chocolate. Spalding’s initial operations on the island focused on sugar cane, and a slave settlement named Behavior was established adjacent to the sugar operations. Over the next 10 years Spalding expanded his plantation to include construction of his residence and a complex of structures on the south end of the island. He also began planting a large agricultural field north of Behavior that became associated with a slave settlement known as Hanging Bull.

In 1916 an elderly Charles Spalding Wylly, who had been a frequent visitor on the island throughout his life, described the slave settlements he had observed as “styled,” perhaps meaning that they exhibited certain special qualities. Wylly (1916:12) wrote: “Villages with thatched roofs and walls plastered inside and out had sprung up in favorable spots; these were styled settlements, such as New Barn Creek, Behavior, Hanging Bull, [see Figure 1] and in each a head man; inappropriately called a driver, (for he seldom did) was placed in charge of probably one hundred souls. . . .”

Although this settlement was not mentioned by Wylly, the 1857 DuVal map (Figure 5) indicates slave housing in three places just north of the Big House at Spalding’s south end plantation complex. These reflect the most formal arrangement of any slave settlement associated with Spalding. A single cabin, probably the residence of a domestic slave, is located nearest the Big House, while a cluster of five cabins is situated northwest of the manor. East of these are seven cabins spaced some 50m to 60m apart in a line adjacent to a large field. While the linear arrangement is somewhat reminiscent of the Chocolate slave settlement, there are three obvious differences: line-of-sight from the manor is minimized by its end-on orientation to most of the slave cabins; the cabins are considerably farther way from the Big House; and a large grove of trees (rather than an open plaza) occurs between manor and cabins. All three factors would tend to reduce surveillance and enhance autonomy of the plantation’s slaves compared to Chocolate.

More dramatic still is the occurrence of the three slave settlements mentioned by Wylly. Besides his comment concerning the limited use of drivers, the very presence of these settlements so far removed from the slave owner’s residence suggests that they were more independent than those at Chocolate. As illustrated in Figure 6, a small

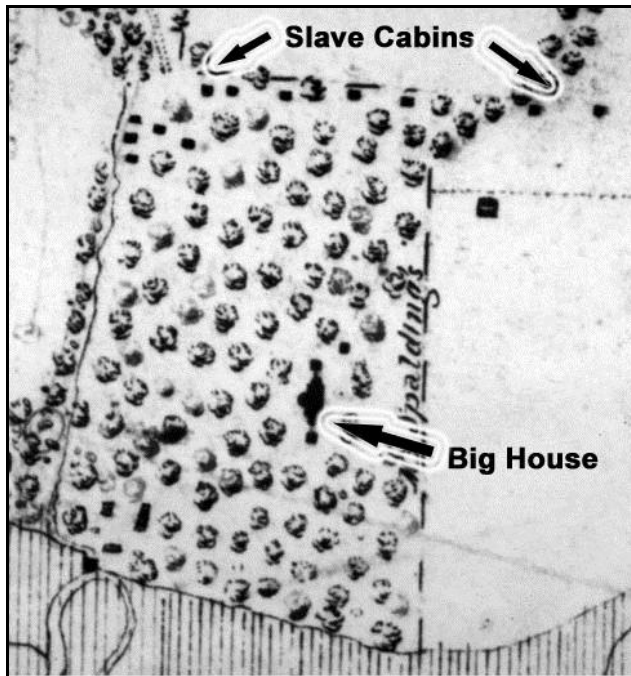


Figure 5. Structures at Spalding's South End Plantation. From DuVal 1857.

settlement defined by four slave cabins is shown in 1857 at New Barn Creek, which is considered a small extension of the larger Behavior settlement. Located east of Spalding's Sugar Works in an open field, three of these structures are spaced about 100m apart in a line along and just east of High Point Road. A fourth structure is located some 40m behind and southeast of the center cabin.

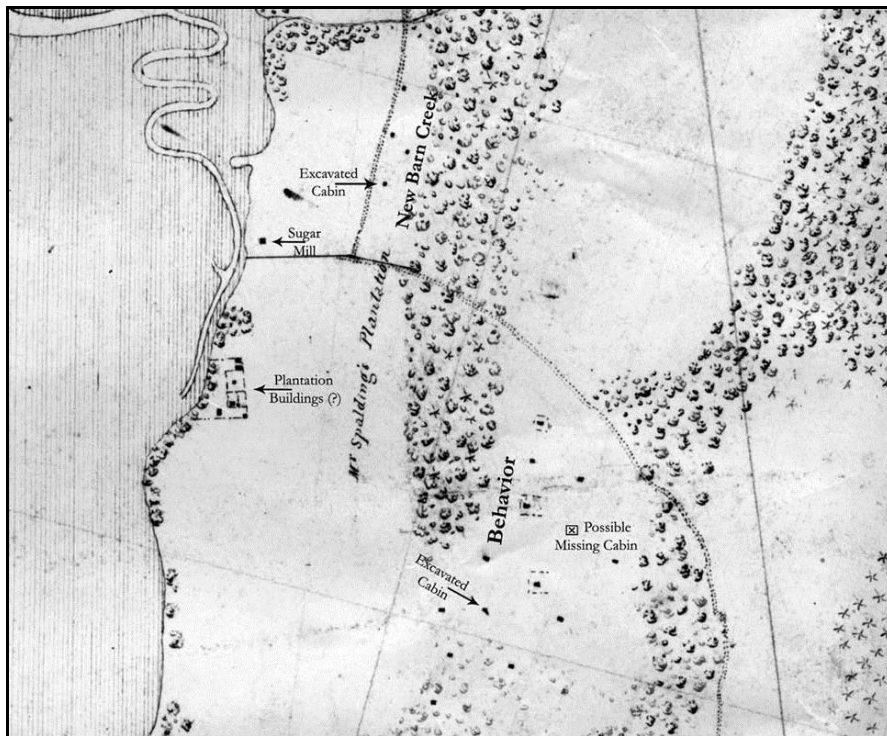


Figure 6. Slave Cabins at New Barn Creek and Behavior. From DuVal 1857.

The main settlement of Behavior is located south of New Barn Creek. This large village of 13 slave cabins spread over an area of 28 ha exhibits a dispersed but non-random pattern (Figure 6). Nearest neighbor analysis ($NNI = 1.30$) indicates that the cabins are fairly regularly spaced an average of 95m apart within three generalized rows. A gap in the pattern suggests that there were originally 14 cabins. Approximately 2 ha of land surround each structure and three of the structures appear to be at least partially enclosed by a fence.

The overall plan of Behavior is consistent with a residential strategy of broad dispersal within a predefined area, suggesting that the general boundaries for the slave settlement may have been prescribed by Spalding. Within this area, cabins were constructed in locations that provided the most contiguous acreage for each residence. In essence, this constitutes an antebellum “live where you work” settlement pattern. An important dimension to this pattern is that for the Geechee villages on Spalding’s plantation there was also a “work where you live” arrangement. That is, they had their own work areas, including some fenced-in parcels, within the villages.

Finally, a similar settlement layout is associated with the Hanging Bull community, located a little more than 2 km north of Behavior (Figure 7; by 1857 this property was owned by Michael Kenan, who was Spalding’s son-in-law). Although smaller in area, its population size was probably comparable. The 16 cabins shown here are dispersed over an area of approximately 12 ha. Nearest neighbor analysis ($NNI = 1.29$) indicates that these are fairly regularly spaced an average of 56m apart, with two of the houses located very near (~20 m) one another. Approximately .75 ha of land surrounds each structure and three of them appear to be enclosed by some kind of fence.



Figure 7. Slave Cabins at Hanging Bull. From DuVal 1857.

Like Behavior, the overall settlement plan at Hanging Bull reflects residential dispersal within a working area. The single structure (identified as a cabin in the nearest neighbor analysis) located next to the road could be a community building and possibly marks the location of an early Geechee church mentioned in later documents and in oral

history accounts (Crook et. al. 2003). Also shown on the 1857 map, and surviving today as a ruin, a tabby warehouse (shown as two structures) associated with a dock is located along the marsh edge across High Point Road.

ARCHAEOLOGY

Two cabins were excavated and provide architectural details of Geechee living conditions. The excavation at Behavior revealed the wall-rubble outline of a small structure and an area to the west and north of that structure (Figures 8 and 9). The cabin measured approximately 2.3 m long by 1.7 m wide and had rounded rather than squared corners; no fireplace was evident. A narrow entrance to the cabin apparently was located in the western corner of the structure but a doorway along the poorly defined northeastern wall of the structure is also possible. The floor of the cabin contained a dense layer of oyster shell in a rich humic sand matrix. Scattered charred wood fragments littered the floor within the western corner of the cabin, just inside what may have been the corner doorway.

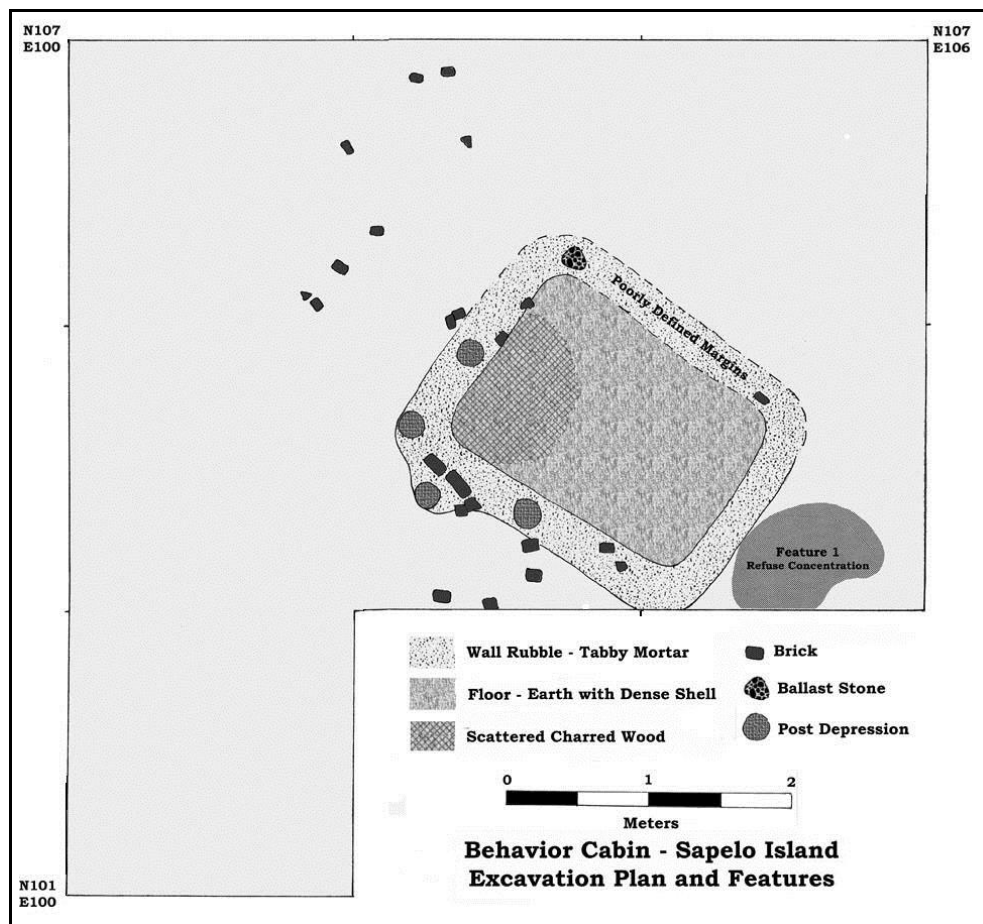


Figure 8. Plan View of Excavation of Behavior Cabin.

The wall rubble was composed of broken pieces of tabby mortar, with occasional bricks and a ballast stone. The tabby mortar fragments exhibited smoothly finished sides, with opposite sides bearing the deep impressions of grape vine (Figure 9). A wattle and daub technique, with the daub composed of tabby, was used to construct the 15 cm thick walls. No post holes were evident, but shallow depressions were observed at several

points along the wall immediately beneath a poured tabby foundation. Possibly created within a form and securing the presumed wall posts, this foundation consisted of a thin layer of oyster shells with occasional brick and brickbats that was covered with about



Figure 9. Tabby Mortar From Behavior Cabin.

10 cm of tabby mortar. An MCD of 1851.6 was derived from 91 sherds, but most of the pearlware was associated with the cabin itself and its mean-ceramic date would be some 20 years earlier. Much of the whiteware was associated with excavation units to the north of the cabin, and that, along with numerous cut nails and sheet metal fragments, indicates that a later frame structure was located in the immediate vicinity.

Measuring about 4.7 m long and 2.5 m wide, the New Barn Creek cabin was somewhat larger but otherwise similar to the Behavior cabin (Figure 10). Note the dark-stained soil leading up to and through the doorway located midway along the northern wall. A large tabby mortar section, finished side down with prominent vine impressions evident on its upper exposed surface, occurred just outside the cabin. Its position suggests a fallen segment that originally was part of the outer wall near the corner of the cabin. Unique to the New Barn Creek examples, a thick whitewash had been applied to the smoothly finished surface on some of the mortar fragments. The MCD derived from the excavated area at the site is 1832.7. Although not shown here, there is also unambiguous evidence of a later frame structure that was superimposed on the earlier foundations, again indicating a transition to a very different architectural style.

At Chocolate, the survey data reveals an interesting contrast with Spalding's plantation. No wattle and tabby daub was found. Instead, tabby plaster, minus the vine impressions and applied to poured tabby walls, was quantified from the 110 survey units dug at the site. Using GIS, the most distinctive aspect of this distribution (21368 g total) is the tendency of significant quantities of plaster to be concentrated near the Big House or special-use structures, but away from near slave cabins (Figure 11). While some of the

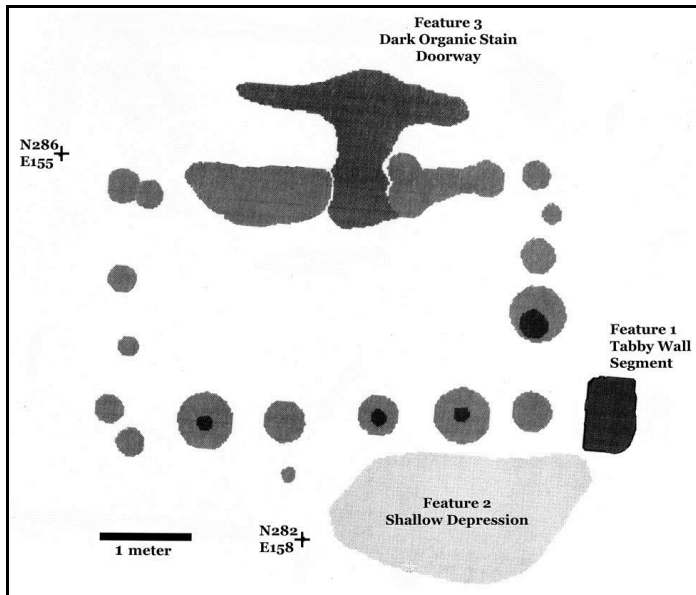


Figure 10. Plan View of Early Slave Cabin Remains at New Barn Creek.

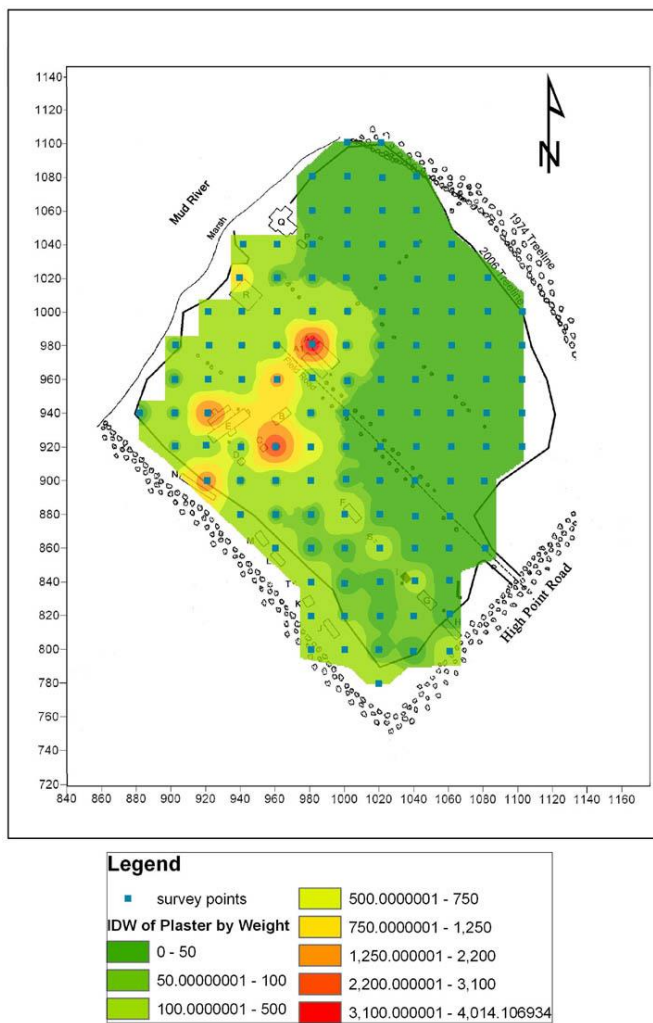


Figure 11. Tabby Plaster Distribution at Chocolate Plantation.

plaster may be associated with 20th century restoration work, the Big House was not restored, indicating that much of the recovered plaster had a 19th century origin. Another architectural item—window glass—showed a similar distribution (Figure 12). The highly circumscribed presence of these architectural artifact classes indicates a caste-based disparity in material culture associated with a basic aspect of life, in this case housing. Despite the substantial cabin construction at Chocolate, glazed windows and plaster finishes constitute architectural differences that distinguish the plantation elite from the enslaved—a clear and visible symbol of status. A small amount of tabby plaster (but not

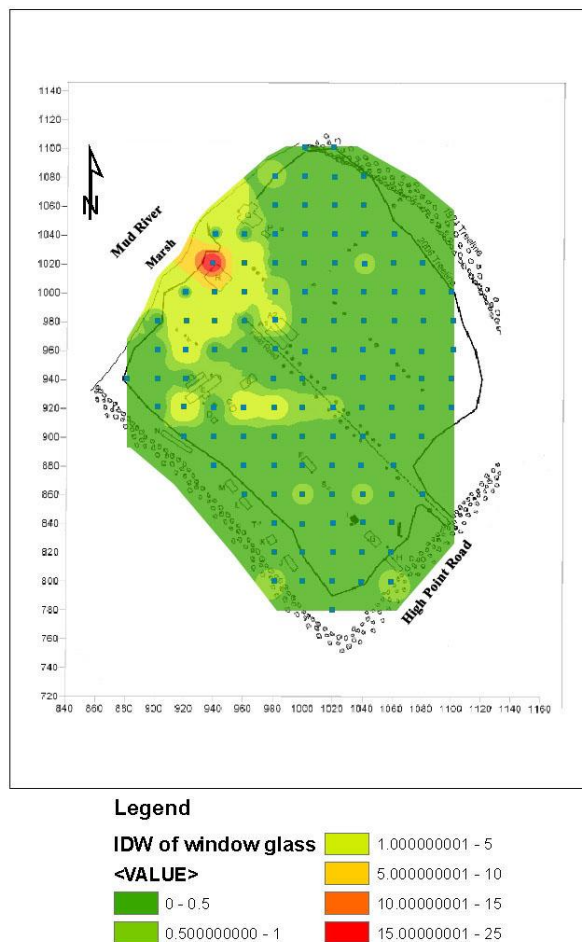


Figure 12. Window Glass Distribution at Chocolate Plantation.

mortar) was also noted at High Point, and may constitute evidence of the presence of a planter's residence, possibly Patrick McKay or a Societe de Sapelo wanna-be planter.

IMPLICATIONS

Formally organized settlements were associated with Chocolate and Spalding's South End plantation, where slave quarters were laid out and built under the direction of the plantation owners. Though more pronounced at Chocolate, in both areas their proximity to the Big House afforded the plantation owners an opportunity, whether exercised or not, for surveillance and overt control. An infrastructure more favorable for creolization existed in those communities created by the slaves themselves, as at Hanging

Bull, New Barn Creek, and Behavior. The organization and layout of these settlements, which perhaps should be more properly called early Geechee villages, provided each household ample space for an economic and social life, out of sight and away from their labors as slaves. A very considerable, but by no means absolute, degree of autonomy is indicated by their settlement plan.

The food remains associated with the Behavior cabin indicate that a diverse range of resources were consumed by its residents, beyond any provisions they may have been provided by Thomas Spalding. These remains point to hunting wild game (at least in part with firearms), fishing, collecting oysters, raising chickens and other fowl, pigs, and cattle. Without a doubt, their diet also included a variety of garden produce not preserved in the archaeological record.

Both dietary practices and especially cabin architecture clearly provide archaeological evidence of, and an appropriate metaphor for, the creolization process that would have been occurring in language and all other aspects of a developing Geechee culture. The wattle and tabby daub construction technique was the creative blending of African and EuroAmerican techniques. On a general level the technology existed in Geechee knowledge, in their individual and collective memories of African dwellings. But rather than the “pure” wattle and daub structures reported in South Carolina and Virginia (Ferguson 1992:63-82), Sapelo’s slaves innovated. Learning how to make tabby transferred seamlessly to construction of their own small cabins, where the strong and durable material replaced mud or clay and was applied to a wattle framework made of locally available grape vines. Although not clearly evident, the roof likely was thatched – either palmetto fronds or marsh grasses. The finished cabins were essentially African huts creatively modified for life on a Georgia coastal plantation (Figure 13). No doubt consistent with common African usage, their small cabins would have served primarily as shelter, with cooking and many other household activities taking place in the yard. By the mid-19th century, frame buildings resting on blocks of wood or sometimes brick or tabby seem to be ubiquitous on Sapelo.



Figure 13. Artistic Rendering of Early Geechee Wattle and Tabby Daub Cabin.

Involuntarily moved from their homelands and placed into bondage with others of varying degrees of cultural similarity, the creole culture that the Sapelo Geechee created successfully coped with the material and organizational problems of their new lives. Guided by an ethnographic perspective, Gullah-Geechee archaeology can contribute to a framework that, as suggested by Theresa Singleton (1995:134), “draws on the critical factors that went into shaping African-American cultural identities in specific historical and social settings . . . including the creation of new cultural forms.”

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